

ARTICLE APPEARED
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WASHINGTON POST
21 February 1984

Legionnaires Reunite at Tiger's Den

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Washington Post Foreign Service

BANGKOK—Wearing his American Legion shirt with a Chinese dragon embroidered on the back and a U.S. flag on the shoulder, the retired Navy fighter pilot and his wife walked into Lucy's Tiger Den as Nee, a veteran hostess of Bangkok's Patpong bar and disco strip, prepared to perform her specialty: topless margarita mixing.

As Nee shook the margarita container over her head and portions of her ample anatomy below, the establishment's proprietor, Alban (Tiger)

Rydberg, shouted a cue and everyone applauded.

The ritual over, Nee slipped back into her dress and the talk returned to the common denominator uniting most of the patrons gathered at Tiger's that night: war. The white-haired former Navy pilot likes to say he's been to five of them, and hasn't been to a bad one yet.

He and about 300 other legionnaires gathered here this month for the first overseas reunion of American Legion Post No. 1, operating in exile. Established in Shanghai, China, around 1920, the post was forced out first by the Japanese in World

War II and then by the Chinese Communists.

Called the China Post and named after generals Frederick Townsend Ward and Claire Chennault, it is dedicated to "soldiers of fortune."

By special charter, the post is the only one in the American Legion that admits foreign and nonmilitary members. In its ranks of about 2,000, therefore, are agents of the World War II Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and its successor, the Central Intelligence Agency; pilots for the CIA airline, Air America, and

other outfits involved in the Vietnam War, Cold War veterans, and even oil and construction workers deemed to have served the American cause.

The headquarters-in-exile of Post No. 1 is in Scottsdale, Ariz., home of the current commander, C.A.S. Helseth, who worked in China before the Communists' 1949 victory. Divisions of the post have been set up in several states and countries. The Bangkok Memorial Division is based at Lucy's Tiger Den, which Rydberg, 68, runs with his Thai wife, Lucy.

The reunion here earlier this month ended with a brunch that evolved into sessions at Tiger and other bars into the wee hours. Its members decided to approach the Chinese government about holding the next convention in Shanghai, provided neither side makes the event political and no restrictions are placed on the usual Legion activities.

Some old China hands and Indochina War veterans had reservations about the move, feeling that members of the staunchly anticommunist American Legion would not be welcome or comfortable in China today.

The week-long gathering was marked by reunions of former comrades-in-arms, war stories and a mixture of fervent patriotism, bravado and irascibility.

Many of those present were airmen involved in secret operations over Laos during the Vietnam War. Even now, many are reluctant to talk about their activities with outsiders and are deeply suspicious of the press. They are, to say the least, politically conservative.

"I thought I was pretty right-wing myself," said a post member who works for the State Department. "But some of these guys are to the right of Attila the Hun."

One of the reunion's organizers, for example, offered a simple alternative to involving American troops in Central America and other world troublespots: use mercenaries.

Such was the legionnaires' hostility toward those considered to hold leftist views on the Vietnam War that British journalist William Shawcross and photographer Tim Page, here to cover the reunion for the magazine Vanity Fair, were banned from all proceedings, including those at Lucy's Tiger Den. Shawcross wrote the book, "Sideshow," an indictment of the U.S. role in Cambodia, and Page has published a book of Vietnam War photographs.

By all appearances, few if any of the legionnaires at the reunion have ever had reservations about U.S. involvement in the Indochina conflict. They believed in it then, and they believe in it now.

"Maybe, just maybe," retired Col. Tom Henry said in a banquet speech at a Bangkok hotel, the American involvement in Indochina kept the domino theory from coming true and prevented Southeast Asian countries like Thailand from falling to communism.

Henry, formerly associated with the elite, secretive Delta Force, some of whose members were involved in the failed hostage rescue mission in Iran in April 1980, said the United States had been in 19 "shadow wars" since World War II, of which Lebanon is the latest.

He dedicated a memorial service at the banquet to victims of those unspecified wars, especially to "those who must remain nameless, faceless and placeless because of the nature of their calling."

"We are a different breed," he said, "and we're proud of it."

Another speaker eulogized two post members who died in the terrorist bombing of the American Embassy in Beirut in April 1983, James Foley Lewis and Phyllis Faraci.

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